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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

In Ethiopian Hills, Five Years to Create Something Out of Nothing

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KORARO, Ethiopia

For seventh graders here, class is held under the shade of a ficus tree because there are only six rooms in the village school. On a recent day, students sat and listened as a visitor from Addis Ababa, hundreds of miles away, asked which of them expected to go on to the eighth grade.

Twenty-nine hands went up - the entire class. Their Addis Ababa visitor, Hailay Teklehaimanot, looked at them with frustration. "How will you get there?" he asked gently.

Seventh grade is the highest class offered at the Koraro Primary School, and the nearest eighth grade is nearly 20 miles away. That's a good six-hour walk because the village has no car.

For a while, no one answered, and most students looked down at the dirt. Then Kahsay Gebneslasie, 14, spoke up. "We heard maybe they might open an eighth grade here," he said. The school's principal, Gidey Hailelassie, was standing nearby and gave a barely perceptible shake of his head.

A year ago, Koraro villagers scraped together the money to pay for a seventh-grade teacher, then put the class under the tree since there was no room in the school. Paying for an eighth grade is beyond the village's means at this point.

If the rich world is actually going to deliver on its promise to halve global poverty by 2015, then it has to start somewhere. It may as well be here in this village, deep in Ethiopia's northern Tigray Province, where food is scarce and water even scarcer, but 14-year-olds still cling to the hope that they will be able to go to eighth grade.

Koraro, which was recently chosen to be a United Nations test case in the fight against poverty, is where the rubber meets the road. It is one of the poorest and most isolated villages in the poorest and most isolated province of one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries.

If poverty can be whipped here in Koraro, it can be whipped anywhere.

The place has nothing. Some 5,000 villagers live their short lives - life expectancy here is about 40 years - out here in the red dust and rocks, eking out a subsistence living. There is no topsoil and the land is eroded, so farming is an uphill battle.

Half of Koraro's children - and there are some 1,500 of them - are underweight and malnourished. Only 34 families out of 1,500 have access to clean drinking water. The rest walk four miles round-trip to haul buckets of dirty water, and the water-borne illnesses they carry, into their homes for drinking, cooking and washing up. There's no electricity, no doctor, no industry, no market, nothing.

But Koraro is drop-dead beautiful, with jagged red cliffs that look like skyscrapers towering over wide expanses of drylands. The centuries-old churches, most carved deep into the cliffs, testify to how long villagers have been here, in one of the world's oldest cultures. Indeed, while it would appear easy for Koraro residents to decamp to a more hospitable site closer to the regional capital, Mekele, most of the villagers refuse to leave.

Zafu Tsegabu, who is 18, watched with her 2-month-old daughter as her husband moved to a bigger town about 25 miles away, and refused to join him. "This is my home here," she said simply.

As soon as the people here were told that they had been singled out to be one of the United Nations' test villages on poverty reduction, they organized themselves into committees to figure out how to get the job done. There's a water committee and a school committee, an energy committee and a health committee. The United Nations plan, spearheaded by the economist Jeffrey Sachs, calls for the participation of foreign donors, the Ethiopian government and the village of Koraro.

Since Koraro has no money to offer, the villagers are supplying the labor and local materials. On a recent day, some 1,500 villagers - just about every able-bodied man, woman and teenager, were hacking rocks out of the earth and moving them into piles. The rocks will eventually be transferred to the site where they hope to build a village clinic.

Mr. Sachs's proposal allots Koraro \$250,000 a year for the next five years to turn itself around. The government of Ethiopia will kick in technical expertise, including help to build a proper road to link Koraro with the rest of the world.

The list of what the money will buy is as basic as it comes: five metal doors for the clinic, one diesel generator to provide occasional electricity to the village, three windows for the school, one grinding mill so villagers can turn their cereal crops into food, and a village truck that could serve a variety of needs.

But there is no eighth grade on the list. There are too many other basic necessities that have to come first.

Still, Koraro, if it works, can become a model for scaling up this type of development for villagers all over Africa - provided the rich world makes good on its promise to donate 0.7 percent of G.D.P. to foreign aid. The Group of 7 summit meeting in July, when leaders of rich countries will get together in Scotland, will probably provide critical answers to that question.

Britain, Germany and France have all provided timetables to ramp up their aid money to 0.7 percent by 2015. But the United States has yet to do the same.

In the meantime, the people in Koraro continue to hope and make plans. In the twilight of her life at age 30, Kidan Hagos, a mother of seven, leaned against a shady tree as she took a break from hacking rocks for the new clinic. Her youngest child, Haregeweini, 9 months old, was propped against her, nursing. Mrs. Hagos, for her part, took a moment to dream big.

Asked what she would ask for if she could have anything in the world, she spent a good three minutes carefully considering her answer.

"A food market close by," she said, "and a well with good water."

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